



Patterns of Prescription Drug Use in the United States, 1988–94

Why is information on prescription drug use important?

Prescription drugs are a vital tool used by health care providers to treat both chronic and acute medical conditions. Nationwide spending on prescription drugs totaled \$100 billion in 1999, more than twice what was spent in 1989. Many in the health care industry and government have ongoing concerns about access to treatment and care, especially among vulnerable populations such as the elderly. Examining prescription drug use among Americans can provide important information on patterns of use among different population groups that can inform this discussion.

Prescription drug information from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) III

Data from NHANES III (1988–94) can be used to obtain estimates of prescription drug use in the civilian noninstitutionalized U.S. population. NHANES does not cover certain populations such as nursing home residents who might have higher rates of drug use. However, NHANES does oversample elderly and minority groups allowing for more precise estimates for these groups.

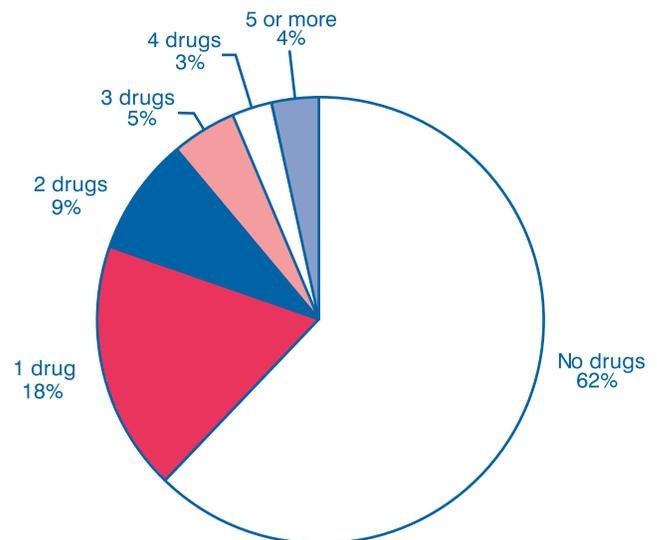
Prescription drug data were obtained by trained interviewers who inventoried all prescription drugs used within a 1-month period by survey participants 2 months of age and older. This information can be grouped by age, sex, and race/ethnicity, as well as other factors of interest.

What do NHANES III data indicate about prescription drug use in the United States?

Overall, a majority (62 percent) of the U.S. population reports no prescription drug use (figure 1); 18 percent use one prescription drug and 20 percent use two or more. Prescription drug use varies considerably by age (figure 2).

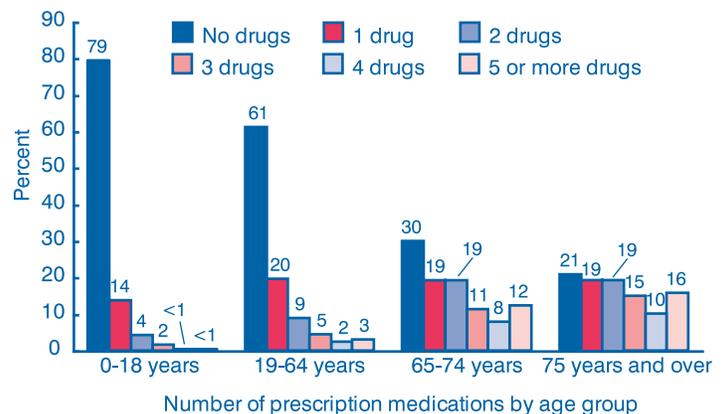
- Prescription drug use increases from 21 percent among the youngest age group, to 39 percent in those 19–64, and to 74 percent in those 65 years and older.

Figure 1. Percent of persons reporting prescription drug use in the past month by number of drugs: United States, 1988–94



Note: Total exceeds 100 percent due to rounding.

Figure 2. Percent of persons reporting prescription drug use in the past month by age: United States, 1988–94



- Multiple prescription drug use also increases with age.
- Less than 7 percent of persons 18 years and under use two or more prescription drugs. Nineteen percent of persons 19–64 years of age use two or more.
- Among persons 65–74 years of age, 51 percent use two or more prescription drugs and 12 percent use five or more. For those 75 years of age and older, 60 percent use two or more prescription drugs and 16 percent use five or more.

There are minimal differences in prescription drug use between race-ethnic groups. There are differences by sex. Among those 18 years of age and under, patterns of use are similar for both boys and girls. Among persons 19–64 years of age, 14 percent of men use 2 or more prescription drugs as compared with 24 percent of women. Among persons 65 years of age and older, 49 percent of men use two or more prescription drugs as compared with 59 percent of women. Prescription drug use also varies by whether a person reports having health insurance (figure 3).

- For those with any reported health insurance, 59 percent use no prescription drugs and 22 percent use two or more.
- For those with no reported health insurance, 80 percent use no prescription drugs and 8 percent use two or more.

When we examine these patterns by age (tables 1 and 2), 78 percent of persons 18 years of age and under with health insurance have no prescription drug use, which declines to 26 percent among persons 65 years and older who have health insurance. However, among persons with no reported health insurance, 88 percent of those 18 years of age and under have no prescription drug use. For persons 65 years and older who have only Medicare coverage, 31 percent use no prescription drugs and 32 percent use 3 or more. For those who have both Medicare and Medicaid, 18 percent use no prescription drugs and 50 percent use three or more. The NHANES data do not

Table 1. Percent of persons reporting prescription drug used by insurance status and age: United States, 1988–94

Number of drugs prescribed	Has insurance	Has no insurance
0–18 years		
	Percent	
No drugs	78	88
1 drug	15	8
2 drugs	5	2
3 or more drugs	3	*
19–64 years		
No drugs	58	77
1 drug	21	13
2 drugs	10	5
3 or more drugs	11	5

*Value does not meet standards of reporting.

Table 2. Percent of persons 65 years of age and over who report prescription drug use by type of health insurance coverage: United States, 1988–94

Number of drugs prescribed	Any insurance	Medicare only	Medicare and Medicaid	Medicare and other insurance ¹
	Percent			
No drugs	26	31	18	25
1 drug	19	18	15	20
2 drugs	19	19	18	19
3 or more drugs	36	32	50	35

¹Excludes Medicaid.

indicate whether reported health insurance includes prescription drug coverage.

Public Health Importance of NHANES

The NHANES III data presented here provide information on patterns of prescription drug use in the U.S. population. An understanding of the current situation is necessary to inform the discussion on access to care and treatment, and when considering changes to the health care financing systems.

Figure 3. Percent of persons reporting prescription drug use in the past month by insurance status: United States, 1988–94

